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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights some of the issues that arose during the drafting of a revised version of the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Guidelines for Public Libraries. The sections of the new document are outlined as follows: (1) The Role and Purpose of the Public Library; (2) The Legal and Financial Framework; (3) Meeting the Needs of the Users; (4) Collection Development; (5) Human Resources; and (6) The Management and Marketing of the Public Library. Three key roles of the public library (i.e., education, information, and personal development) are discussed. Other issues addressed include: the importance of determining priorities; competition with other organizations; changes due to developments in information technology; access to information and communications technology; community needs analysis; customer care; development of collection standards; effective leadership; and marketing and promotion. (MES)

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Guidelines for Public Libraries in the 21st Century

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Paper

In this paper I want to highlight some of the issues that have arisen during the drafting of a revised version of IFLA's Guidelines for Public Libraries and have some discussion about them. Let me start by giving a brief summary of the process so far.

In 1994 the third version of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto was published, the drafting having been done by the IFLA Section of Public Libraries. This has now been translated into over twenty languages and has become an influential document in public library development. The Manifesto is an important statement of principles but there was a demand for a more detailed document with recommendations on guidelines and standards for public libraries. IFLA has produced two previous versions, now both out-of-date and out of print. The first called "Standards for Public Libraries" was published in 1973 and re-issued with slight revisions in 1977. In 1986 "Guidelines for Public Libraries" was published. As the titles indicate the drafting committees differed in their approach. The 1973 version was based on the view that uniform standards could be recommended, the variable factor being the pace at which the standards could be attained. In contrast the group drafting the 1986 Guidelines stated that, as needs and resources were so varied, common standards were not possible. Instead they offered advice which they thought was of general application.

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We needed to get a range of opinions on what should be included in the revised document and how it should be presented before we started. In August 1998, therefore we organised a seminar in the Netherlands with an invited group of twenty-two librarians from twenty-one different countries. We have based our work on the outcome of that very stimulating seminar.

It was apparent from the outset of this project that we had to try and produce guidelines which would look to the future of public libraries at a time when the future was changing at unprecedented speed.

The two key issues we faced immediately were

- Would it be possible to produce a set of guidelines which would be relevant to public libraries throughout the world?
- Should we include both guidelines and quantitative standards?

After two days discussion the seminar arrived at a number of conclusions on style and content. The seminar recommended that we should include some quantitative standards and this we have tried to do. We also decided to include brief summaries of initiatives and services in different countries to illustrate the text and we are still looking for more examples.

After many changes this is the structure of the new document.

Introduction

1. The Role and Purpose of the Public Library
2. The Legal and Financial Framework
3. Meeting the Needs of the Users
4. Collection Development
5. Human Resources
6. The Management and Marketing of the Public Library

Fundamental issues arose immediately.

Does the public library have a future or are the dramatic developments in information and communications technology likely to make it redundant?

In this age when information is collected, presented and used in exciting and changing ways from people's home or workplace what is the role of the public library?

One way of answering those questions is to see how public libraries are continuing to develop throughout the world. In a society, increasingly driven by market forces, countries, at all stages of development and with very varied levels of resources, are continuing to develop public library services. Some are very well established: in England we are celebrating the150th anniversary this year of the first Public Libraries Act. In other countries public libraries are much younger but are nonetheless often vigorous and exciting institutions. Public libraries have survived and developed because they meet a need and because they are an agency for change. Their future will be threatened when they cease to meet a public need and fail to act as an agency for change for individuals and for communities.

The key to the continuing growth and development of public libraries is that they continue to provide services and resources to meet the needs of the public who pay for them. But what in this information age are those needs which justify the continued existence of the public library?

Although the concept of public libraries is recognised throughout the world their role and priorities are not always the same. We have highlighted what we believe are the three key roles of the public library though there is considerable overlap between them.

Education
Information
Personal Development

Education. Support for formal and informal education has been a basic function of public libraries since their earliest days. The demand and need for education has never been greater ranging from basic literacy and numeracy to a highly specialised level. In some countries support for education is seen as the primary role of the library and development is directed to that end. But public libraries are only one of many agencies involved in education and we have to decide, given limited resources how public libraries should support education. If we give this high priority are we duplicating what is available from libraries in educational institutions at the expense of providing services to people who do not have access to any other library?

Information. The acquisition of reliable information is now recognised to be vitally important and of great value. Information is power in the modern world and it enhances the chance for people to enjoy fulfilling lives and contribute to society. The lack of it denies people these opportunities. There is more information available now than at any time in the world's history and the demand for it is insatiable. There are now a multiplicity of ways in which people can access information and they do not have to leave their own homes to do so.

Because the importance of information is now recognised does not mean that public libraries will automatically be people's primary information source. There are many other alternatives. Public libraries have to prove by their performance that they still have an important role to play in information provision. Public libraries require policies, plans and resources directed to providing high quality services that meet the information needs of the community. We need to be certain we understand what distinctive role public libraries have in information provision.

Personal development. Public libraries have always played a very important role in providing opportunities for personal development. They provide a range of ideas, opinions and creative experience not available anywhere else. Many people both famous and otherwise have said how their lives have been changed by their use of public libraries. A key function of public libraries in some countries is the provision of books and other materials for recreation and leisure. It has been said that bookshops can provide the same function and that this is not role of the public library. Even if we have a bookshop and can afford to use it we buy books for our own personal use. Public libraries are buying books and other materials for the community paid for by the community. They are available to all. Using interlending and information technology we can make the world's knowledge and literature available to everyone. This is an amazing achievement and one we are much too modest about. It could be said that this role is what makes the public library a unique institution.

When we were drafting the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto we were urged by librarians in some countries not to include the leisure function. They said that politicians would not be prepared to fund an institution which provided materials for leisure and recreation. Education and information had to be the primary functions of the public library particularly if resources were scarce. We made no direct reference to leisure and recreation in the Manifesto and it was criticised by some librarians for that reason. They argue that it has been the development of leisure-related services, which has resulted in public libraries in those countries, which provide them, reaching a high proportion of the population. The goodwill this has created has helped the public library occupy a central role in the community and gain significant public support. In the Guidelines we have identified this key role of supporting personal development. We have also included direct reference to the provision of services for people's leisure and recreation.

With different degrees of emphasis and priority depending on local circumstances these are the key roles of public libraries throughout the world. There are others, which are also very important, services to children and young people, to groups in the community with special needs, the library as a meeting place and the relationship between libraries, culture and the arts.

It is very important that librarians and their governing boards determine what their priorities are and develop services based on those priorities. Public libraries however well funded need to make the most effective use of their resources and to achieve this they must decide their priorities and undertake planning and policy development. The alternative is a random approach to service development with the very real risk that none of the services will be provided adequately or consistently. Policy development should involve the governing body , the staff and the public. The public is much more likely to feel that the library service is theirs, that they "own" it if they have the chance to take part in decisions on priorities and service development.

We must also be aware that though public libraries are publicly funded organisations, they are in fact in competition with other organisations. In every area of our service, education, information provision and services for leisure and recreation there are other agencies, some of which are very much better funded than public libraries. We cannot assume that people will prefer to use our services just because we are a public library. We have to prove ourselves over and over again and this means we must always be completely professional about our work and the way we present our services.

We have been very aware that we are aiming to develop guidelines for public libraries at a time of radical and accelerating change. The impact of the Internet and other electronic developments has increased considerably since we started in 1998. We cannot be sure where these developments are going to lead and what the ultimate effect on libraries will be. We do not know whether print on paper has a long-term future or whether it will be replaced by e-books or some variation of them. In this context should we recommend that public libraries should concentrate their resources on developing IT related services or should they continue to provide a wide range of services, including the print-based services they have traditionally provided?

I do not think there is a simple answer to this critical question though I think in some areas of library provision, for example fiction collections and services to children a multi-media approach including books is likely to be the most appropriate for some time.

We recognise that access to ICT is not universal. Its development depends on three factors, literacy, computer skills and reliable telecommunications networks. These basic requirements are not available throughout the world and even in countries where they are there are significant groups, for example many old people, for whom ICT is still a mysterious and alien science. The United Nations reported that in 1999 South Asia with 23% of the world's population had 1% of Internet users and that 40% of the population in developing countries had never made a telephone call. Of course these figures will change but it will take time. In that time there is a very real risk that the gap between those that have access to information and thus power and those that do not will grow. Here is a real role for the public library, to strengthen its position as a gateway to the information world. We must be careful, however, that we do not close access to the other doors through which information can be obtained. We need to consider how best the public library can help to bridge the digital divide.

We live in a world in which presentation is seen to be very important. The quality of the content of much of the information available via the Internet does not always match its attractive presentation. Librarians have always been concerned with the quality of the content and organising effective access to it. Public librarians have an important part to play in guiding users to find the most reliable and relevant information for their needs, what has been called the librarian as knowledge navigator. We need to be certain of the best way to fulfil this role.

The Guidelines include a section on legislation and funding. To enable it to carry out its roles the public library should be supported by legislation and by adequate and sustained funding. They should also be well governed and administered and develop coherent policies. Libraries must be able to represent all ranges of human experience and opinion, free from the risk of censorship. Librarians and their governing bodies must uphold these basic human rights and resist pressure from groups and individuals to limit the material available in the library.

Public libraries must aim to meet the needs of their users. Public librarians are sometimes guilty of deciding what services and materials they should provide without any attempt to assess what the potential users, who largely fund the service through their taxes, want.

The public library is essentially a local service targeted at the library and information needs of the local community. We stress the importance of community needs analysis, user involvement in policy-making and the judgment and experience of the librarian as the key factors in determining the shape of the public library service. To carry out a community needs assessment the librarian needs to gather information about the community, its organisations and its social and commercial make-up. It also should carry out regular surveys of both users and non-users of the library.

A fundamental principle of the public library is that it should be available to all and not just to the able-bodied, literate adults who are able to visit the library. We must start with the precept that we are there to serve the whole community and shape our services accordingly. The public library must be service focused. The priority should be to develop services structured to meet users' requirements, and deliver them where and in the way that they will be most effective. Provision of library buildings is only one way of delivering services though an important one. Library services must go beyond the walls to satisfy the needs of those who for any reason are unable to visit the library. The development of information technology provides many new ways of accessing services from the home or the

workplace.

A high standard of customer care should be an integral part of all policies and procedures. There should be regular staff training in customer care and new policies and procedures should always be based on the assumption that they must be primarily for the benefit of users rather than the convenience of the staff and the organisation. User education is more important than ever before to help users make best use of the technology. We know that no public library, however large and well funded can meet all the needs of its users from its own resources. Networks and resource-sharing greatly increase the capacity of public libraries to meet user needs and ICT provides many new ways in which networks can be organised and exploited. Public libraries have a good reputation for cooperative working and this should be developed taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new information world.

Libraries are made up of collections of information and cultural materials in a variety of formats including access to the resources of other libraries. The range of formats continues to grow. Standards for collection development are often asked for but difficult to develop. The development of collection standards is affected not only by levels of funding but also by a number of other factors e.g. the number of items available in the primary language of the community served, access to other information sources and the needs of the local community. Standards are often related to population statistics. This assumes reliable population figures are available but this is not always the case. Last year I visited Soweto, the African townships outside Johannesburg. Every day people are moving in to informal squatter camps. The population of Soweto is estimated to be between 3-5m people, served by just six public libraries. It is difficult to propose a standard to meet this situation. We have included some collection standards while recognising that these will have to be adjusted in the light of local circumstances.

There are other important factors in collection development. A large collection does not necessarily equate with a good collection. The key criterion must be the relevance and currency of the material provided. New material can be lost if introduced into old and out-dated stock. Organising access to materials both in the library and beyond is a vital part of collection development made easier by information technology. It used to be common for public libraries to maintain large reserve stocks of older books. Is this necessary when so much more material is available electronically?

Materials are one crucial part of the library; staff are another. Although there may be different categories of staff within a library the development and provision of services should be a team effort. We have included what we think are the skills that all library staff should have and what we see as the main duties of a qualified librarian. Library staff must maintain high ethical standards if they are to retain the full confidence of their users. Effective and regular staff training is vital at a time of such major change in the ways library and information services are delivered. Staff must be able to cope with change and be equipped to help users to do so.

The quality of management is an important element in the provision of a successful library service. Library managers need to develop skills to enable them to provide effective leadership. These will include policy development, operational planning, financial management, building and maintaining networks and the management of library resources. They must also build good working relationships with members of their governing body and with the public they serve. They will need to make use of a range of management tools, for example

community needs analysis, performance measurement, monitoring and evaluation.

Public libraries will not realise their potential if their services are not actively promoted within the community. They should develop a marketing and promotion plan with all staff expected to play a part in its implementation. Librarians should have the skills and confidence to work with the media and in the community. We should also remember that satisfied users are the best advocates for the public library and this reservoir of goodwill towards the service can be tapped to good advantage.

Those are some of the issues that we have attempted to address in drafting these new guidelines. The latest draft is available on IFLA-Net and we would like to have comments by 30th September this year. Having made such amendments as are necessary we hope to have it ready for publication in printed form and on the web by the end of this year. I do not expect all public libraries to immediately adopt all the recommendations and proposals in the new guidelines. I do hope that different sections will be of use to different libraries at various stages of their development. They have been framed to assist librarians in any situation to develop an effective public library service to meet the needs of their local community. In this exciting and sometimes daunting information world it is important for those in search of knowledge, information and creative experience that they succeed.

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